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The Limits of Moral Authority
By Dale Dorsey
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D's book presents a case against Moral Rationalism or the thesis of *Supremacy*, which is that "if one has a moral requirement to ϕ, one thereby has a practical, normative, obligation to ϕ" (2). This thesis, according to D, is widely accepted in the history of philosophy as well as in contemporary ethics. Against moral rationalism D argues that "the fact that a given action is required from the moral point of view does not by itself settle whether one ought to perform it, or even whether performing it is in the most important sense permissible" (2). The book's most provocative upshot is the claim that it can, sometimes and for some agents, be *irrational* to do what morality requires.

The book can be divided into three parts. The first is introductory. D explains his conceptual framework (ch.1), and argues against *a priori moral rationalism* (ch.2), the claim "that the truth of *Supremacy* can be known independently of substantive, first-order theorizing about the content of moral/practical reasons and requirements" (40). According to this position, moral rationalism is not a possible outcome of ethical enquiry but a "*limiting condition* on first-order inquiry" (40) that could show that certain moral theories that do not respect Supremacy fail. For D's case against a priori moral rationalism as well as for his subsequent arguments, the intuition that at least sometimes moral requirements conflict with non-moral requirements and have to normatively *compete* with them is pivotal. D argues that any property that delivers a meaningful explanation for the supposed supremacy of morality should rather be understood as a property that attaches to all-things-considered oughts, not morality per se. This allows us to explain why there is genuine competition between moral and other reasons, and why it seems that sometimes morality does not win this

competition. The upshot of D's discussion of a priori rationalism is that in order to decide whether Supremacy is true, we need a substantive inquiry into whether the content of moral oughts lines up with what we, all-things-considered, should do.

In the second argumentative unit, D presents two arguments against substantive moral rationalism, which he sees as a greater challenge then a priori moral rationalism. Substantive moral rationalism holds that inquiry into the content of morality reveals that what we morally ought to do and what we ought to do all-things-considered always happens to coincide. D seeks to drive a wedge between moral oughts and what we have all-things-considered most reason to do. The first of his two main arguments for this (ch.3) starts from the *Principle of Moral Impartiality*, according to which, other things being equal, all persons are of equal moral importance and their interests "generate moral reasons of strength proportional to the extent that the persons whose interests they are, are morally important" (72). D considers this principle "of substantial prima facie plausibility" for morality (74). He argues that two standard objections against impartiality, the Overdemandingness and the 'Nearest and Dearest' objections, do not discredit impartiality as a moral principle. In fact, they show that

> we *lack decisive practical reasons to conform to impartial demands*. Thus the arguments on offer here […] *become* the crucial first-order inquiry into Reasons-as-such sufficient for a rejection of moral rationalism given an impartial account of the moral point of view (77).

Since impartiality is intuitively plausible as a moral principle and moral rationalism should not be accepted as an a priori constraint on morality, we should accept impartiality but also accept that it is sometimes rational to do something other than what morality commands, because the impartial commands of morality can excessively infringe on our own well-being and our relationships to others. This picture best accommodates our considered judgments about what is moral and rational.

The second, independent, main argument (ch.4) is less straightforward. In a nutshell (because to do it justice would require too much space), D argues that moral anti-rationalism better accommodates than other theories that there are *supererogatory* acts or rationally permitted actions that are not morally best even though morally we must always perform the morally best action.

So far D has established that we are not always rationally required to conform to moral commands. In the third and final argumentative unit he takes his anti-rationalism one step further by arguing that "some people are, sometimes, under some conditions, normatively required to act immorally" (137). D's argument proceeds in two steps. Firstly, he argues (ch.5) that at "the default level of practical rationality, people have normative permission to conform to moral demands" (137). In a second step (ch.6), he argues that the rational permission to always act morally only holds on a *default* level or "*prior* to any amplification or strengthening given the normative significance of self" (191). The notion of the normative significance of self expresses the idea that an agent can place "himself under the enhanced authority of reasons" (188). Commitments, ground projects or existential changes can "*strengthen* preexisting reasons in comparison to their default strength" (187). If Supremacy is false, agents will sometimes on a default level have rational permission to act

immorally. If agents can also reinforce non-moral reasons, then these reasons should be sufficient to make the immoral act, in some cases, not only permissible but also rationally required for this agent.

D's own example (borrowed from Sartre) might help to illustrate this: If I am to make a choice between caring for my elderly mother or joining the resistance against Nazi occupation, it could be the case that impartiality the best thing I could do is join the resistance. I thus morally ought to do it. Intuitively, however, it is rationally permissible to do both: care for my mother, since I have special, partial commitments towards her, and join the resistance. Moral anti-Rationalism endorses this intuition and holds that both options are rationally permissible. Once I have chosen to care for my mother, I placed myself under the enhanced authority of partial reasons, because I chose to be the person who cares for sick and elderly relatives rather than join a resistance group. Reinforcing these partial reasons might imply that if, in the future, I am confronted with the choice between staying with my mother or joining the resistance, all else being equal (the resistance does not need me more or less than before), it might now be rationally *obligatory* for me to stay with my mother and irrational to join the resistance, even though the latter is still the morally best choice. I have to stay with my mother, since due to my commitments my reasons to care for her are reinforced to such an extent that they do not ground merely a permission but an obligation – they are now much stronger than my moral reasons.

Let me begin my critical evaluation with registering a worry. D takes great care to ensure that his theory of rationality matches our intuitions about what is all-things-considered rational. He is far less interested in having his conception of morality match our intuitions of what is *moral*. Whilst I agree that impartiality, in abstract, is

an incredibly intuitive principle, it is easy to construct cases in which the impartial option is not merely different from the overall rational option but also from what we firmly believe to be the *moral* option. If we could maximize the impartial good by torturing an innocent person then, at least on many ways of fleshing this case out, we think it would be *immoral* to do so. In this situation, it would not be the case that we think torturing the innocent would be morally obligatory but irrational. Whilst D does not present a straightforwardly Consequentialist account of morality, for instance, he wants organ harvesting ruled out (141), he is generally dismissive of absolute prohibitions (119).

One promising way to argue against Moral anti-Rationalism would therefore be to demand that ethics must take intuitions concerning intrinsically bad actions and absolute (or near absolute) prohibitions as seriously as those pointing to impartiality. This would, ideally, lead to a theory of morality and rationality that is in line with our moral intuitions as well as our intuitions about what is all-things-considered rational. It seems likely that such a theory would show much greater correspondence between morality and rationality than a theory on which morality is conceived of as revisionary whereas rationality tracks our intuitions. Such a theory would considerably undermine D's arguments that are supposed to drive a wedge between morality and all-things-considered rationality. One might be even be tempted to turn D's case upside down: What he shows is that you cannot be both an impartialist and a moral rationalist. You have to give up one. D thinks it is moral rationalism, but those who are less convinced than D that impartiality is the most central normative principle for morality might rather consider D's case for anti-Rationalist as further ammunition against strict impartiality.

I will close this review with a discussion of what D acknowledges as the main objection and critically evaluate his responses. This will also help us understand what some of the normative and applied applications of Moral anti-Rationalism are.

Moral anti-Rationalism threatens to make morality ineffective in reducing *inequality*. The rich presumably grow up in ways that make it more likely that they develop expensive habits and hobbies that become part of what makes their lives worth living. It seems that on an anti-rationalist framework they have greater rational prerogatives (maybe even rational obligations) to indulge themselves. This is bad news for a conception that conceives of morality as impartial and as a tool for achieving more equality. D admits that he is "*really* bothered" (203) by this "extremely powerful" (203) objection and that this problem "keeps [him] up at night" (172). In response he makes two suggestions. The first one is *political*: If Moral Rationalism is false than we should not expect that the solution to inequality is simply a moral one. He considers anti-Rationalism rather "a *further* reason to insist on a progressive account of distributive justice" (204-5) and for institutional change such as "progressive taxation of extreme luxury for the benefit of the poor" (204). The problem I see with this is that anti-Rationalism places the burden to push for progressive change chiefly and maybe exclusively on the marginalized and politically powerless, since for the powerful it might be rationally permissible, maybe even rationally obligatory, to oppose anything that might force them to share their wealth. This is particularly problematic given that current political systems are organized in such a way that those who are most likely to have a rational obligation to oppose change, namely, those who benefit most from the *status quo*, are in the strongest position to influence the course of politics.

D's second suggestion is *education*. Given

> the structure of morality, it would seem there is substantial moral pressure to shape the education of the younger generation in a particular way: to attempt as best one can, to *align* the interests of the younger generation to moral interests such that, over time, the tendency for conflict between personal projects, prudence, etc., and morality – even an *impartial* morality – is reduced (205-6).

The appeal to the "structure of morality" is mysterious here, since the very idea of D's book is that whilst the structure of morality might be impartiality, this does not result in rational obligations and not even necessarily rational permissions. In addition, there are two further issues for D's proposal on an anti-Rationalist framework. Firstly, D stresses that his argument entails that when deliberating about morally relevant scenarios we should look not only at the commands of morality: "how we ought to live is in large measure *up to us*. Of course, it is not entirely up to us. We still can't murder strangers for the sake of a quick buck no matter how much we identify with doing so" (202). The pedagogical doctrine that would follow from this should be one that, whilst it imbues children with respect for certain moral norms and prohibitions, above everything fosters agents' capacity to autonomy and independent decision making, not their regard for impartiality. Surely, agents must be able to take up an impartial perspective. After all, D does not mean to deny that this perspective matters, but ultimately the anti-Rationalist education should emphasize autonomy over impartiality or equality. This might not necessarily be implausible as a pedagogical approach, but it is not what D hopes for. Secondly, there is also the worry that parents would have to become hypocrites. If they acknowledge that it is the right thing to educate their children to be moral then shouldn't they also acknowledge the central

value of morality for their own lives? We sometimes do say (jokingly or not): “Do as I say, not as I do!”, but can we also say: “Value as I say, not as I value?” There has to be a point at which a rebellious and bright pupil will ask: “Well why don’t *you* value as you say?” and the anti-Rationalist response would be: “I acknowledge the value of morality for your generation but not (always) for me and there is nothing rationally deficient about this.”. This might be something the anti-Rationalist can say, but there is, I take it, a strong intuition that it is indeed very deficient if you value morality as supreme for others to have but not for yourself to live by. D’s attempt to side-step the full brunt of the main objection against Moral anti-Rationalism rather brings out further unwelcome implications of his view.

In sum, D’s book is very clearly written and tightly argued, it does argue for a controversial and innovative non-mainstream position, and it neither hides unwelcome implications of this position nor the appeal of alternative view points, with which D engages in great detail. It will make valuable reading for everyone working on the status and value of morality and on practical rationality. In particular, D’s critical discussions of current a priori and substantive forms of Moral Rationalism constitute serious challenges for Moral Rationalists to overcome.

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